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China Travel: Finding the "Real" China

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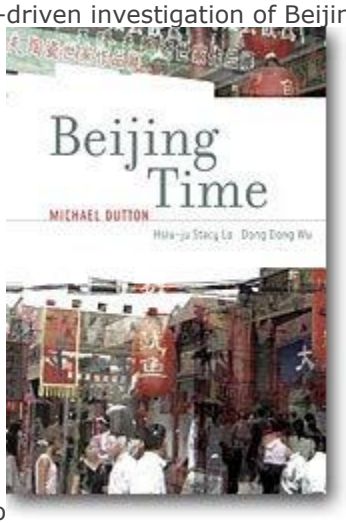
By Kate Merkel-Hess

I recently received two new travel books (of sorts) in my mailbox, one of which I wrote a few short bits for. *Beijing Time* by Michael Dutton, with Hsiu-ju Stacy Lo and Dong Dong Wu, (due out in May from Harvard University Press) and*Urbanatomy: Shanghai 2008*, edited by Nick Land (published by China Intercontinental Press in 2007) fall at opposite ends of a rather loosely envisioned "travel book" spectrum, but both promise an on-the-ground look at "new" China.

Beijing Time, by Goldsmiths, University of London Professor of Politics Michael Dutton and independent scholars Hsiu-ju Stacy Lo and Dong Dong Wu (the advance copy I read did not clarify how research and writing was split between them), is a theory-driven investigation of Beijing as both location and



symbol. The authors explore Beijing through layout and buildings, investigating how Beijingers interact with their city's built environment, and asking, ultimately, what that interaction says about the city's (and by extension, China's) past and future.

The book begins from a premise that has almost achieved the level of trope in writings about China: the idea that contemporary China is full of strange juxtapositions—from the linguistic to the economic—and that out of these ironies a deeper truth and meaning can be excavated. For instance, in describing a series of buildings along Changan, the authors write that "in a very Chinese way they are examples of what Mikhail Bakhtin might have called 'grotesque realism'—that is, the absurdist, carnivalesque 'turning of the tables' on the good-taste aesthetic realism of the ruling elite." That China does indeed mirror Bakhtin's dreamscape/nightmare carnival vision is apparent to anyone who has spent more than a few days in China. But I feel that not only has this idea been extended almost as far as it can go, but that, in its worst forms, it veers toward an Orientalist celebration of China as so potentially "other" as to be incomprehensible.

Dutton et al., clearly familiar with the city, manage to avoid such an extreme, as the goal of this book is—in a pursuit that will certainly be replicated in many different media as this summer's Olympic Games draw closer—to uncover a "hidden" Beijing. To that end, the most interesting section of *Beijing Time* is the final two chapters, in which the book considers the varied meanings of authenticity and inauthenticity in Beijing. This is a theme others have explored as well: Peter Hessler, for instance, deployed this same theme in *Oracle Bones*(2006). "Authenticity" does not take quite the same manifestations in China as it does in the West, and this is indicated here through various illustrations of the authentic and the inauthentic in China. This is a topic with clear room for further work, however, as the many Beijing Olympic stories that litter publications these days have at their heart a narrative of trust/distrust and authenticity (Will Beijing have clean air, as the government promised? Is the government trying to hide the real China behind glossy new buildings and freeways? Etc.). This tension deserves more thoughtful consideration than it is currently getting in the popular press, and

requires a heavy dollop of self-reflection in addition to articulation of these issues as they play out in China.

Urbanatomy: Shanghai 2008 guidebook is just the thing backpackers might make room for (particularly those who are planning to stay in the area a while). I wrote two very brief historical pieces for this book last year—one on the author Ding Ling and another on May Fourth in Shanghai—though I have absolutely no financial stake in whether any of you buy it. (Jeff Wasserstrom, another *China Beat*contributor, also wrote for the guidebook, as did a number of other scholars and journalists.) The book is thick—almost 600 pages of glossy type and pictures, so it's not easily toted around during the day (my favorite for this is an old standard—the *Lonely Planet Shanghai City Guide*—if you have favorite guidebooks, please feel free share your suggestions).

One of the nicest features of the book is its breakdown by neighborhoods, with an occasional listing of shops, museums, and hotels along their respective streets. Most guidebooks, of course, organize their materials in this fashion—but 600 pages leaves room for a lot of detail, and the historical background and interviews with prominent Shanghai figures (both expat and Chinese) sets this one apart. As those who have visited and lived in Shanghai know, its neighborhoods do have distinct characters, and it is refreshing to see that reflected in a guidebook, both in text and in image. Moreover, many of the guidebook's writers are based in Shanghai (those familiar with Shanghai's English-language *That's Shanghai* will recognize a number of names in the guidebook, including the book's editor, Nick Land; *That's Shanghai* is one of Urbanatomy's publications) and the book's features reflect this easy familiarity with the city's young expat life, from an interview with Chinesepod's Ken Carroll to recommendations for yoga studios and fashion boutiques.

This is a reference to the lively book by Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, which was originally published in 1965 and published in English translation in 1993. The book analyzed the novels of French Renaissance author Francois Rabelais and defines in them two strains of thought that Bakhtin believed had been overlooked in previous readings: "carnival" (a time during which European masses felt free to subvert the hierarchy through humor), and "grotesque realism" (basically, scatological and sexual humor; the main means by which subversion of hierarchy was accomplished).